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From the ‘reel’ world to the ‘real’ world: subjective experiences of violent fictional entertainment

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Abstract

Fictional violence holds strong appeal for a wide audience. Given this appeal, and the public's concern about it, researchers have extensively investigated whether there is a direct effect of exposure to fictional violence on individuals' aggressive behaviours. In the present research, we aimed to contribute to the comparatively smaller body of research concerned with factors that motivate individuals to engage with fictional violence. We interviewed ten adults about their own subjective understanding of the reasons why they engage with fictional violence. We used thematic analysis to explore participants' talk about their subjective experiences of their motivations. We interpret our findings to indicate that individuals make sense of their engagement with fictional violence as a means to understand the real world, to regulate arousal, and to experience a just world. We discuss the practical implications of these findings and directions for future research.

Keywords:

violent entertainment, motivation, meaning-making, social realities

Consider this fight scene: two men, reminiscent of David and Goliath, battling to the death. David, on the cusp of winning, brings Goliath to the ground. But instead of killing him, David impales Goliath with his spear and attempts to force a confession from him for the murder of his sister...until Goliath kicks his legs from under him and proceeds to beat David savagely, before finally putting his thumbs through David's eyes and crushing his skull until blood and brain matter spatter the ground. The brutality of the moment is overwhelming, and yet this is a scene that actually took place on HBO's *Game of Thrones*, which won the 2015 Emmy for Outstanding Drama Series. In a show that is well known for its graphic depictions of violence, Oberyn Martell's death generated a backlash from critics and fans, who claimed that *Game of Thrones* had gone too far (Malitz, 2014). *Game of Thrones* is not the only show to depict such scenes of brutality on a regular basis. *Hannibal*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Criminal Minds* are part of a growing list of shows with increasing levels of violence and cruelty, while violence has not only escalated in movies, it has normalized to the point that gun violence in PG films has tripled since 1985 (Bushman, Jamieson, Weitz & Romer, 2013).

Violent entertainment continues to attract large and loyal audiences, despite public concern about its content, and despite a large body of psychological research, particularly from social psychology, that is used to support arguments about its ill effects (e.g., Savage & Yancey, 2008). Perhaps these audiences would agree with critics of social psychological 'direct effects' research, who argue that claims about the effects of violent entertainment on behaviour are greatly exaggerated and based on flawed research (e.g., Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009). Or, they may agree with scholars in media and cultural studies (e.g., Barker & Petley,

2002), who argue that ‘media violence’ is an arbitrary category that is essentially meaningless, especially for audiences.

Media critics emphasize the importance of attending to the meaning and motives individuals ascribe to their experiences of fictional violence. Consistent with this approach, in the present research we sought to examine individual audience members’ subjective experiences of their own motives to consume fictionalized violence. Motives are everyday psychological processes that drive individuals to act in certain ways (Vallerand, 2012). Motivation has both internal and external dimensions (Toure-Tillery & Fishbach, 2014; Winter et al., 1998). Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal processes involved in activity and is equated with enjoyment of an activity for the sake of the activity itself, in contrast to extrinsic motivation, which is driven by external rewarding influences (Vallerand, 2012). In our research, we are interested in exploring the intrinsic motivational aspects of individuals’ engagement with violent fiction. Sensation seeking, arousal regulation, and information seeking are three motives for engaging with violent entertainment that have been explored in previous research (Aluja-Fabregat & Torrubia-Beltri, 1998; Xie & Lee, 2008; Sparks & Sparks, 2000).

Many theories of motivation suggest that people seek out physiological arousal through stimulating activities to ensure growth and self-actualization, and that if individual needs are not met, there can be negative consequences for well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This approach suggests that engaging with violent entertainment may serve important functions, a possibility that has been investigated in earlier research on a similar topic (Shaw, 2004). Some researchers suggested that high sensation seekers satisfy their need to for arousal from violent

entertainment (Aluja-Fabregat & Torrubia-Beltri, 1998; Zillmann, 1998). In contrast, Portell and Mullet (2014) found that low sensation seekers also choose to engage with horror for entertainment. These findings indicate that sensation seeking may not be the only motivating factor that explains individuals' enjoyment of fictional violence.

As mentioned above, motivated behaviour may facilitate personal growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000), including increased understanding. Zillmann (1998) argued that viewers engage with violent content because they are compelled to learn about dangerous situations that threaten survival. Zillmann's argument suggests that engaging with violent entertainment goes beyond sensation seeking, and is supported by research in which the removal of violent scenes from the 1993 film *The Fugitive* did not take away its enjoyment for audiences (Sparks, Sherry & Lubsen, 2005). In another study, audiences were randomly assigned to view one of three versions of television dramas: graphic violence, sanitized violence, or control (no violence). The researchers found that the no violence version was rated significantly more enjoyable than the other two (Weaver & Wilson, 2009). Such findings are evidence that motivations beyond arousal and sensation seeking may explain why individuals engage with violent entertainment.

Shaw's (2004) narrative analysis of how people made sense of their experiences with both film violence and real-life violence focused, in part, on the functions of fictional violence. She concluded that fictional violence serves several knowledge-related functions such as education, self-understanding, and exploration of existential questions of existence and mortality. Her findings provided important evidence that people's engagement with and understanding of violent entertainment is complex and multifaceted.

Taken together, previous research into motives to engage with fictional violence reflects Vallerand's (2012, p. 44) components of intrinsic motivation: 'intrinsic motivation to know', 'intrinsic motivation to accomplish', and 'intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation'. With the caveat that individuals' motives to engage with fictionalized violence may extend beyond these three categories, we find Vallerand's approach to be a useful organizing framework, and so we adopted it to structure our analysis.

The Present Research

In the present research we investigated adults' subjective experiences of their own motives to engage with fictional violence. We agreed with Shaw (2004, p. 132) that it was important to focus on forms of media that are pervasive in contemporary culture. Our research questions focused on individuals' subjective experiences of their motives to engage with passive forms of entertainment that contain fictional violence. Although there may be qualitative differences in the experience of graphic novels compared to television or film, in that the latter contain moving images and sound, whereas the former contains static images and print, in our interviews we invited participants to talk about their engagement with any or all of these three passive forms of entertainment that contain violent content: television, film, or graphic novels. In most interviews, the conversation focused on participants' engagement with television, and so television is the focus of most, but not all, of our findings. The important point is that whether the medium was book or moving image, the interview focus was on individuals' engagement with a passive form of fictional violence and how our interviewees made sense of their motivations to do so.

Method

Participants

Participants were a mix of students ($n = 7$), academic faculty ($n = 1$) and support staff ($n = 2$). Although we did not ask participants to state their ages, we estimate that their ages ranged from 18 to about 50. Six participants were male and four were female. Eight participants were Irish, one was Austrian and one was Norwegian.

Materials

A semi-structured interview was used to elicit participants' experiences of violent entertainment and their motivations for engaging with it. The interview schedule included broad questions about what constituted violent entertainment to allow participants to define what they considered violent or graphic content e.g. "Tell me about a film, TV show or graphic novel that you engage with which involves violence?" Specific questions were asked once participants were engaged in a topic to aid elaboration. For example, "How do you feel when you don't get any resolution?" was asked of participants discussing the importance of justice. Interviews were digitally recorded, and then transcribed. Interviews lasted between 31 and 60 minutes ($M = 41.1$, total 411 minutes).

Procedure

After we received ethical approval from our midsize university's Research Ethics Committee, we began to recruit participants to the study via email and advertisement. An email was sent to the University's campus population and an advertisement was placed on the Facebook page for the University's Fan Forum, which is an official university society through which members engage in discussions about popular culture. Two participants were recruited via email and eight were recruited through the Fan Forum. Participants self-identified as engaging with graphic fictional content (e.g., watching violent film or television) on a regular basis. Interviews took place in the university psychology department's qualitative laboratory ($n = 4$), or in the participant's own home ($n = 6$). The interviewer obtained informed consent from each participant, including permission to digitally record the interview, and then the interviewer began the interview, which was organized using a semi-structured interview schedule.

Data Management and Data Analysis

We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis for transcribing, coding, analysing, and managing our interview data. The first author transcribed all interviews verbatim, through which she familiarized herself with the data corpus and developed initial ideas for how to code the data. Once she completed the transcription, the authors began to develop the coding scheme. A deductive or 'top down', theory-driven approach was taken to coding, directed by our overarching interests in participants' descriptions of motives and their subjective understanding of why they watched violent content. The first author identified all passages that reflected key

concepts related to motives such as knowledge, entertainment, sensation seeking, escapism, or curiosity, or emotional experiences such as arousal, excitement, or guilty pleasure. Inductive coding was incorporated into our procedures so that we might not overlook other interesting patterns in our data. Through inductive coding we identified, for example, the pattern of participants' talk about justice seeking as a motive. The first and second author decided the final set of codes through an iterative process of discussion and comparison of excerpts sampled from across the data corpus.

Next, we analysed our coded data to identify themes in participants' talk about their motives to watch and emotional experiences of watching violent television. Researchers choose thematic analysis when they are concerned with subjective interpretation of individual experience, which is useful when the aim is gaining a deeper understanding of a certain phenomenon (Willig, 2008). In our analysis, we took a contextualist approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to the data to identify themes that depicted participants' experiences, while we also examined the ways in which participants spoke about their motivations and experiences within social context. Because our research questions were informed by motivational theory, we identified most themes deductively. We stayed close to the semantic level in our analysis, but because we took a contextual approach, we were also able to explore the data for latent themes. This is important because the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential for social desirability concerns to shape semantic aspects of participants' talk (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Below, we use interview extracts to ground our themes in examples, a practice that is essential to good qualitative research (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999, p. 220). Excluded

material is indicated using square brackets [], while short pauses (of no more than 3 seconds) are represented using three full stops. All participants are identified with pseudonyms.

Overview of Findings

We identified three themes in the data set. The first, cognitive satisfaction, is named for the motivational principle that people seek out information to satisfy a cognitive need for knowledge (Vallerand, 2012). Cognitive satisfaction was characterised by participants' desire for knowledge, a desire which entailed two components: understanding and preparation. By "understanding" we refer to the motive to understand behaviour, especially deviant behaviour. By "preparation" we refer to the motive to become prepared to respond to violent encounters in the real world.

The second theme is arousal regulation. Participants said they regulated certain responses through engagement with violent content. This theme also consisted of two parts: physiological arousal and escapism. By "physiological arousal" we refer to a level of engagement that elicited physiological reactions such as increased heartbeat in response to fear or excitement. Some participants said they viewed violent content as an outlet for negative emotions, as they thought it could decrease physiological arousal. By "escapism" we refer to motives to engage with violent content as a means to escape reality, for example, through role-play.

The third theme is justice. Most participants expressed a desire for justice as a motivation to engage with violent fiction. The most common form of justice described by participants was punishment of a villain for deviant behaviour. Participants often described fiction as a more

satisfying source of justice than the real world, which they find offers little or no resolution to violent events.

Each theme shared two features. The first was that participants said they engaged with violent content in order to satisfy a desire or need. These needs reflected (Vallerand, 2012, p. 44) taxonomy of motivation that divides intrinsic motivation into three components: ‘intrinsic motivation to know’, ‘intrinsic motivation to accomplish’, and ‘intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation’. Each theme exemplified a feature of this tripartite model, and this is explored in greater detail within the analysis. The second feature linking the three themes was the connection participants made between fictional worlds and the real world. Both of these commonalities will be addressed in the following analysis.

Theme One: Cognitive Satisfaction

Understanding

Knowledge seeking was one of the strongest themes to run through the data because it was discussed by each participant, most commonly in relation to abnormal behaviour:

“I think it’s more the...why is somebody like that? Why is a murderer the way they are...I dunno. Get into the mind...Criminal Minds I suppose, is my one. It’s my favourite so...it’s a bit like...what is behind all that? Why do people do things like that?” (Anna)

Each participant explained their interest in antisocial behaviour with words like ‘compelled’, ‘fascinated’, and ‘enthralled’. The use of such words suggests that the desire to

understand is rooted in a need for cognitive satisfaction (Vallerand, 2012), with participants using fiction to satisfy their desire to understand abnormal behaviour. This is in keeping with the first component of the tripartite model of intrinsic motivation, which is ‘motivation to know’. Its premise is that people engage with activities because they derive pleasure and satisfaction from learning or understanding different or difficult concepts (Vallerand, 2012).

The finding that people experience fictional violence as educational and a means to understand “abnormal” behaviour is problematic, especially given the evidence that fictional portrayals of mental illness are mostly stigmatizing and distorted (Stuart, 2008).

Why do people choose fiction to gain insight into deviant minds instead of, say, documentaries, or nonfiction books, to understand real world problems? When asked, participants’ responses seem to indicate that the vicarious experience of fictional violence fills a gap in their real world experiences. They noted that violence and deviant behaviour are not part of their day-to-day lives, and that violent fiction provides them with a means to experience and construct meaning for it. For example, Ned claimed the absence of violence from his life is one reason to watch violent television:

“For me it was the fact that, I don’t know anybody at all that’s in any way like this, you know. Ahem, that’s what you want to see, you want to see what that is like.”

Other participants also talked about how fiction provides them with the opportunity to experience violence and deviance that real life does not offer. Several participants, despite making strong distinctions between fictional fiction and the real world, described using fictional

entertainment to conduct armchair analysis and construct meaning for behaviour. This was exemplified by Anna when asked if she made a distinction between fiction and reality:

“Oh, I do, yeah. Definitely. [pauses] Well, I think...I dunno, because it says fictional cruelty but some of those...episodes might be based on a real serial killer or real things.”

None of our participants appeared to question the validity of their choice to use fiction to make sense of their realities. This apparent disconnect between fiction and reality is not an uncommon feature of people's engagement with fiction, and the conflation of reality with fiction has a number of important consequences for individuals' attitudes and beliefs. For example, much previous research has explored the powerful influence of film and television on memory and perception (Butler et al., 2009), and the tendency of viewers to retain fiction as fact (Levine, Serota, & Shulman, 2010). For example, Dowler (2003) found that individuals who regularly watch crime shows are more fearful of crime than are individuals who do not. Furthermore, as the line between violent fictional entertainment and everyday life blurs in viewers' minds, so too does their understanding of, and attitudes toward perpetrators, victims, and law enforcement. A recent review suggests that fictional violence reproduces racial and ethnic stereotypes, and renders relatively invisible the experiences of minority crime victims (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). A recent content analysis by Parrott and Parrott (2015) demonstrated how crime shows reproduce the intersectional stereotypes of the white female as being the most likely target of violent crime, while according to FBI statistics, in the United States, Black men are actually the most frequent homicide victims. Furthermore, Parrott and Parrott found that violent crime

shows present crime as most likely perpetrated by strangers, when in reality, most violent crime is committed by neighbours, relatives, or friends. Taken together, these findings suggest that overreliance on fictional violence for insight and understanding may, in fact, created distorted, stereotyped-based attitudes toward both perpetrators and victims.

Preparation.

Our participants described fictional violence not only as source of useful information for understanding abnormal behaviour, they also described it as a resource for learning how to effectively prepare themselves for in case they ever encounter violence in the real world. For example:

“I think sometimes, if you’re never exposed to anything violent or aggressive or things...you know, scenes of death of people you like in shows, you would be unprepared in some ways for the real world.” (Caleb)

Caleb spoke several times about how violent content could prepare people for the real world, either by making them aware of the existence of violence, showing them, and thereby teaching them, how characters react to different situations, preparing them to cope if something like that were to happen to them. Caleb contrasted violent television to “happy” TV shows, especially children’s cartoons, which he criticised them for deluding people into thinking that real world events always have a happy ending. This idea that darker themes in fictional content have added value because they prepare people for reality was echoed by Jason, who highlighted the importance of representing events like death in children’s television programming:

“It just prepares kids, like, that anything can just be taken away at any time.”

Caleb and Jason both talked about how representations of death in fiction prepare children for death in real life. Other participants talked about how watching fictional characters deal with violence taught them how to cope with and respond to events in real life. Important to our aims, this finding illustrates that the “to know” aspect of intrinsic motivation (Vallerand, 2012). Individuals engage with violent fiction to learn how to respond to a violent situation and also to gird themselves against existential threat. The idea that fictional violence can prepare children and adults to deal with difficult existential concerns, or equip them to deal with violent situations, was discussed unquestioningly by all of our participants, unaccompanied by any caveats or reservations about the validity of transferring and applying knowledge gleaned from fiction to their everyday lives. In fact, in none of our interviews was there recognition of the gap between vicarious experience and real life, or between fiction and reality, or of any problems that could arise from using fiction to prepare for the possibility of future encounters with real world violence.

Some of our participants did offer some distinctions between violent fictional entertainment and everyday life, even only in degree, rather than in kind. For example, in her description of how she used fiction to make meaning from real world events, Charlene said:

“TV dramatizes things, so it’s not like you’re getting to see exactly how it is, but it’s near enough that you can...get an idea. Yeah, they might make the guy more weird than a real guy in the same situation might be, but there’s an element of truth. Like, it’s grounded in reality.”

This extract illustrates how participants blurred the boundary between fiction and the real world in ways that allowed them to maintain claims that fiction contains elements of truth, which suggests that participants are motivated to believe that they can glean truth from fiction, a suggestion that is reflected in Shaw's (2004) research, in which she found that fictional narratives are central to some people's quest to find meaning behind violence.

This desire to find meaning can be seen in excerpts from participants who self-identified as watchers of violent fiction, and who also claimed dissatisfaction with gratuitous violence:

"It's more...just how pointless it is. It annoys me. Like, where's the plot in killing tons of peop- characters just to shock people?" (Charlene)

Given that participants said they engage with graphic content to understand behaviour, it makes sense that they would express frustration with "pointless" fictional violence from which meaning could not be constructed. Participants expressed frustration with gratuitous violence, which contrasted with the satisfaction they said they gained from portrayals of violence, which, they said, provided insight into criminal minds. Taken together, these findings suggest that our participants made sense of their engagement with fictional violence as motivated by a desire for knowledge and meaning.

Theme Two: Arousal Regulation

Physiological arousal.

Self-regulation is the ability to respond to an experience in an appropriate manner, especially to positive or negative stimuli (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the present study, participants described the experience of viewing violent fiction as either an adrenaline rush or emotional release. For some participants, physiological arousal was the definitive aspect of their experience of fictional violence. These participants frequently mentioned the arousal excitation aspects of violent shows as their motivation to watch:

“You get the...sense of...a rush really, from seeing this action, without it actually affecting you in real life, [] It’s enjoyable because it gives it a bit of an adrenaline kind of boost.” (Jason)

For Jason, this adrenaline rush appeared to be central to his experience of viewing violent content because he mentioned it on several occasions. More importantly, when asked if the feelings he got from viewing comedy (the only other genre he said he watched) were as intense, he replied that they did not compare. When asked why, he explained that comedy was something people experienced on a regular basis (through everyday laughter), but as fear was a less commonly experienced emotion, it had a longer lasting effect on the body, resulting in increased and prolonged heightened arousal. Other participants also talked about how the unfamiliarity of violent content in relation to their day-to-day lives made it more exciting, and resulted in a physiological level of arousal that could increase heart rate or make them stop breathing:

“It gives you a rush. It makes you hold your breath, it makes your heart beat faster, and you’re not going to experience that, in real life.” (Charlene)

Such physiological arousal has been pinpointed by several studies as a reason people engage with certain activities, because they want to experience the stimulation of an adrenaline rush (Berkowitz, 1993; Hill, 1997, 2002; Xie & Lee, 2008). Whether participants watched violent content in order to increase or decrease arousal, all described how they watched violent content in order to regulate their emotions. Fictional violence was described as a resource for emotion regulation they did not have access to in other areas of their everyday lives. For example:

“You’re not physically venting your frustrations, but you’re projecting them onto that person and when you see him taken down at the end of the film, you’re like, ah, that makes me feel better.” (Joe)

One aspect of fictional violence that afforded participants an avenue to arousal regulation is escapism, an attraction that was described by almost all participants.

Escapism.

The most common feature of the escapism theme was thrill-seeking, the idea that violent fiction presents participants with experiences far removed from their everyday lives:

“It’s really the danger and the thrill-seeking and you’re like, because, you know, you might be living a very ordinary life yourself.” (Barbara)

“Fleeing the ordinary” is a core element of escapism, whereby people seek out experiences that blot out the obligations and stressors of everyday life (May, 1972; Shaw, 2004; Senseng, Rise & Kraft, 2012). Most participants expressed a desire to ‘escape’ mundane or stressful events through engagement with fictional violence. For them, immersion in fictional worlds that are more exciting than real life provided such escape:

“You’ll never be able to save the world from an asteroid, you’ll never be able to fight with the Avengers against Ultron, you’re never gonna be able to do that. But if you read about it and you can immerse yourself as much as you can, you start to think...that’s what I’d like to be, I can be that guy.” (Joe)

The ability to safely explore the darker side of one’s self through fiction was described by several participants. One participant, Keith, even identified this vicarious role-play as a chance to “be the villain”. He claimed that people can relate to violence because everyone has a dark side they would like to indulge without consequence. When asked if he thought that was why people engaged with such content, he replied,

“That’s why I engage with them [violent fiction].”

Although this excerpt is from part of an interview in which the participant describes the experience of reading a book, which is arguably qualitatively different from television and film, it effectively illustrates the immersive power of fictional violence to offer opportunities for vicarious role-playing as someone or something they could never be or become in real life.

These excerpts illustrate how escapism involves both promotion motives and prevention motives (Stenseng et al., 2012). The basic premise is that promotion motives direct attention toward sources of positive affect (visible in participants' desire to experience arousal or novel events), while prevention motives direct attention away from stressors or disturbing thoughts (emphasised by participants' desire to escape 'mundane' everyday life) in order to reduce negative affect.

Perhaps participants choose violent fiction to regulate complex emotions because, ironically, violent fiction feels safe. When discussing what made fictional violence so easy to engage with, Charlene said the safety of knowing it was fake removed any negative feelings about the experience. This feeling of safety was echoed by other participants:

"It's not something you're gonna watch someone else go through in real life, s-so at that point you're like, you enjoy it because it's so different. But at the same time you feel incredibly safe."
(Phillip)

This is consistent with previous research (Portell & Mullet, 2014) that found viewers are entertained by frightening content because there is no direct personal threat, making it safe to watch.

Participants' descriptions of emotion regulation reflect the third component of the intrinsic motivation tripartite model: 'motivation to experience stimulation' which posits that people engage in activities in order to experience stimulating sensations (Vallerand, 2012). In this instance, participants talked about viewing violent fiction as a means to experience

physiologically or psychologically thrilling sensations. This motivation to experience stimulation can be seen most clearly in responses of participants who explicitly stated that they were motivated to engage with violent entertainment in order to heighten arousal. Although less obvious, participants who watched violent fiction in order to ‘escape’ their mundane realities also highlight a desire to experience stimulation, one that is more psychological than physiological.

Theme Three: Justice

All participants explained how a desire for justice motivated them to view violent content. For most, the specific motive was retribution:

“There’s something very...satisfying about seeing some guy who’s been going around terrorizing people and hurting people get his.” (Charlene)

This sense of satisfaction was echoed by participants who spoke about how satisfying it was to see a villain get his comeuppance in fictional violence. According to participants, fictional violence is satisfying because it delivers closure they might not otherwise experience in the real world. Some participants condoned violence as justified retribution:

“That makes you accept the fact that they are...being brutal. Because you are making excuses for them all. It’s like, oh, she did lose her baby, of course she’s angry, of course she does that.” (Louise)

It is striking that most participants endorsed vigilante violence in the form of violent retribution or self-defence by characters they clearly defined as the protagonist or the ‘good guy’, but not by the agonist or the ‘bad guy’. ‘Punitive violence’ was discussed by Zillmann in his work on why people engage with violent entertainment (1998). He suggested that condemning aberrant behaviour leaves viewers morally free to enjoy the infliction of violence upon deserving subjects, allowing viewers to overcome any negative feelings they have about violence by ascribing justifiable motive to it.

Framing violence as justifiable is common in fiction, where actions are often clearly either “good” or “bad”, “white” or “black”, with all shades of grey omitted. But these simplified dichotomies may negatively skew people’s perceptions of justice in the real world, especially if they transfer their endorsement of, for example, vigilante justice, from fiction to real world events (Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011; Schweitzer & Saks, 2007). Findings from our interviews suggest that such transference is a valid concern, at least to laypersons: two of our participants explicitly discussed the ways that they believe such framing shapes beliefs about justice:

“I guess it’s set up so you see our guys as the right guys.” (Joe)

“You don’t question it at all, because it’s...I think it’s because of the fact that you don’t see anything, because of the fact that when it happens in great numbers, it’s patriotism, you know, when it happens in individual numbers, then its murder.” (Ned)

Here, Ned spoke about the show *Homeland* and how viewers do not really experience the show as violent, despite the fact that it depicts events like wars, drone strikes, and assassinations

each week. He noted that part of why he thinks viewers do not consider the show violent is because actions of American military are justified as patriotic duty.

Although no other participants talked about how justice is contextualised in fiction, many said they derive satisfaction from retribution in violent shows because their own desire for retribution in the real world often goes unsatisfied. At the same time, some participants expressed ambivalence about retributive violence. For example, in reference to the real world Elisabeth Fritzl case, Louise said the fact that the fact that Elisabeth's father, Josef Fritzl, was sentenced to life in prison was not sufficiently satisfying. In response, she had imagined a fictional outcome, in which his children dealt out their own brand of justice to him, but that this imagined outcome also made her feel "immoral" for having such "inappropriate" fantasies. Louise described how she overcame this discomfort by focusing on the idea that the man being punished deserved it. She explained that without justice, sitting through violent fictional scenes would be pointless (something expressed by many participants), suggesting individuals find relief or satisfaction in fictional retribution. Louise illustrates this in her interview:

"Seeing him finally getting caught, it feels like you are finally being rewarded."

Every participant who talked about justice in violent fictional television, whether for retribution, resolution or both, used words such as, 'satisfy', 'fulfil', and 'accomplish', which further exemplifies the notion of reward. Similarly, in his theory of punitive violence, Zillmann (1998) posits that viewers overcome their misgivings about their desire to view retributive violence by framing it as having an ethical purpose (i.e., upholding the law and moral standards through the punishment of bad behaviour) and as a social good (i.e., enforcement of moral

standards). This is in keeping with the second component of the tripartite explanation of intrinsic motivation, ‘intrinsic motivation to accomplish’ (Vallerand, 2012). The basis of this premise is that people engage in activities for the satisfaction of accomplishing or creating something, and for our participants, it appears that what they want to create, even if only temporarily and fictively, is the basis for belief in a just world. It is unclear to what extent satisfaction of the justice motive through fictional entertainment shapes individuals’ own beliefs in a just world, their appetite for vigilante justice or even their confidence in the justice system, to dispense appropriate punishment.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated how people made sense of their motivations to engage with violent fiction as entertainment. We found that participants often described violent entertainment as a means to satisfy needs that often go unmet in their everyday lives. While recognizing that individuals’ motivations to engage with fictional violence are complex, multifaceted, and, perhaps, not fully knowable through the qualitative methods employed in this research, we interpret our findings within contemporary motivational frameworks that explain how people strategically engage in activities that satisfy unmet needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vallerand, 2012).

Blurred Boundaries between the ‘Reel World’ and the ‘Real World’

Across the interviews participants blurred the boundaries between fictional entertainment and everyday life. For example, most participants said they consume fictional violence to gain insight into violent or deviant behaviour. Some also explained how they believe fictionalized

violence arms them with knowledge they can use in the real world if and when they were confronted with death or violence. Our participants' beliefs that fictional portrayals of violence are 'safe' ways to encounter violence are consistent with previous research and theory (Portell & Mullet, 2014; Zillmann, 1998). For example, Zillmann argued that people engage with violent content because they are compelled to learn about dangerous situations that may threaten their survival. Similarly, this notion that exposure to fictional violence can prepare people for real world violence is consistent with Villaneva et al.'s (2013) findings that people say they are interested in violent fictional representations of human reactions that can teach them about behaviour. Moreover, fictional narratives provide an accessible way to make sense of violence (Shaw, 2004).

The results from this study highlight a troubling pattern in which individuals make sense of the real world based on fictional entertainment. Our findings suggest that people draw conclusions and make decisions about the real world on the basis of a system of knowledge gleaned from fictional violence, although the two may share very few features. More specifically, our participants seemed to believe they could gain insight into mental illness, deviant behaviour, and violent events in the real world through witnessing violence in fictional worlds. Our participants also seemed to believe they could prepare themselves for the prospect of real world violence by observing fictional characters' responses to violent or traumatic events. This is problematic, as it may have serious consequences for behaviour and trigger harmful consequences of bad choices made on the basis of faulty reasoning. The consequences of the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality, especially for these sorts of educational purposes, could be addressed in future research.

Escape from the Mundane

This idea that fictional violence offers individuals vicarious access to experiences not readily available to them in their everyday lives is reflected in participants' descriptions of physiological arousal. Increased physiological arousal was described as an extremely important aspect of the experience of viewing violent fiction, which is consistent with previous research on the enjoyment of film (Xie & Lee, 2008). Participants also talked about how violent fiction was exciting to them because their everyday lives were so mundane. This finding is consistent with researchers who argued that violence is arousing because it is novel (Sparks & Sparks, 2000).

Violent fiction offered our participants a means to escape their 'real worlds', which they experience as boring. This is consistent with previous research on escapism, which found that people engage with certain activities in order to escape from the routines of everyday life (Stenseng et al., 2012). The boring life is often a meaningless life. Recently, researchers have established a clear link between boredom and existential threat, finding that individuals who feel bored are motivated to engage in activities that re-establish a sense of meaning or purpose to life (van Tilburg & Igou, 2016). Violent fiction may be a means to restore meaning and alleviate the existential threat posed by the boredom caused by banal, mundane, and routine everyday life, especially if it affords opportunities to learn or to experience justice. This finding is also consistent with Shaw's (2004) work, in which she observed that one of the important functions of engagement with violent film is a means through which "we explore our own morality, which enables us to transcend, for a moment, our relatively banal existence" (p. 147). Taken together, these findings suggest that engaging with fictionalized violence is a means that individuals use to

satisfy the unmet need for a meaningful life. Future research could investigate whether boredom, and a search for meaning, drives engagement in other kinds of fiction, and whether satisfying existential needs through immersion in violent fictional entertainment is an effective strategy for managing the longer term consequences of living a subjectively mundane and meaningless life.

Quench a Thirst for Justice

Participants talked about watching violent fiction as if it afforded them a sense of justice, something important but unavailable in their social worlds. Participants claimed that there is little justice in the real world and few satisfactory responses to injustice. Consequently, retribution is an important aspect of fictional violence for viewers. Indeed, our participants were more willing to condone fictional violence when it was portrayed as an act of retribution rather than an act of gratuitous violence. Moreover, when participants thought violence was gratuitous, or when perpetrators did not face justice, they enjoyed it less, and reported feeling ‘angry’ or irritated, ‘irritated’ and said it was ‘maddening’ when an agonist was not punished. For many participants, sitting through the violent scenes only had a purpose if resolution was achieved, otherwise they felt sitting through the violence was ‘pointless’.

The finding that a thirst for retributive justice motivated participants’ engagement with fictional violence is consistent with Zillmann’s theory (1998) of punitive violence, whereby viewing is morally justified because, in their minds, the viewer has already condemned the person being punished. Similarly, another study found that justice as a repercussion of violence in media content enabled people to make meaning from it (Bartsch & Mares, 2014). One aspect of the justice motive we did not ask our participants about was the portrayal of violence inflicted

against the innocent. We think there is an inextricable relationship between portrayals of violence against innocent victims and the satisfaction of vigilante justice, but it will take future research to determine the ways in which viewers interpret and respond to fictionalized violence against innocent victims. Future research should also explore whether regular exposure to fictionalized accounts that glorify vigilante justice is consequential for individuals' social justice attitudes, beliefs about the appropriate responses of citizens and victims to crime, as well as their belief in the effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

Quest for Knowledge or Morbid Curiosity?

People's desire for justice seems to be intertwined with their desire to understand behaviour, and can be seen in participants' frustration with meaningless, gratuitous violence. However, we cannot draw firm conclusions about whether the participants' fascination reflects a quest for meaning or morbid curiosity. 'True' motivations cannot be gleaned from interview data. Participants may not know themselves what compels them to watch violent television, and it is reasonable to speculate that self-presentation concerns shaped at least some of participants' responses to the interview questions. Concern with self-presentation was evident in several interviews, especially when participants talked about their emotional, psychological and physiological responses to violent television content. For example, many participants spoke haltingly or stopped sentences abruptly, and they also used distancing language such as 'you' instead of 'I' when describing physiological responses to violence onscreen.

These contradictions and self-corrections were common across the interviews. Participants' comments such as, "*should have prepared a tiny bit more before coming in here*"

(Joe), or the “*good question*” response from several participants, and the long pauses taken before responding, illustrate the ways in which participants were working through ideas with which they had not previously engaged, and perhaps constructed their attitudes and explanations for the first time in the interview context. Indeed, even though they had signed up to talk about their engagement with fictional violence, many of our interviewees seemed to be taken off guard by the task. This observation links back to the question of what media violence actually is, and whether it is even a meaningful category for its audiences. If, even when arriving at an interview to discuss violence, participants were unable to fully articulate a response, it suggests that this may be the first time they had ever had to think about fictionalised violence as a topic separate from TV and film more generally. This would seem to bear out the media scholars' critique that the violent scenes in film/TV are typically understood as part of the fictional narrative and not as some kind of reality breaking through the fantasy (Barker & Petley, 2002).

Some participants seemed reluctant to admit they enjoyed violence, and may have felt the need to legitimize their engagement by framing it as something more ‘socially acceptable’, such as a desire for knowledge, a pattern also observed by Tait (2008). If so, this could weaken our conclusion that knowledge seeking is the strongest motive for engaging with violent fiction, as it is possible that some of the knowledge seeking motivations expressed by participants were influenced by self-presentation concerns. For example, while talking about motivation to watch, Barbara mentioned advertising as an effective tool and referred to trailers for *The 100*, which showed some violence that made the show look interesting, thereby enticing her to watch. When asked to elaborate on the violence piquing her interest, she immediately retracted her previous

comments, saying, *“Not really the violence, I don- that was wrong. It was just...more that it looked like an interesting story.”*

From a discursive perspective, it may be that halts and pauses indicate that participants were conscious of the importance of self-presentation on this topic and were working to construct accounts of motives to engage that would effectively undermine alternative versions that could impugn their personal integrity (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). For example, Barbara negated her first response with a more innocuous explanation for engaging with violent entertainment when specifically asked about her interest in violence. This pattern illustrates the challenges involved in researchers’ attempts to understand socially undesirable behaviour and motives. Because we did not take an explicitly discursive approach to these data, the ambiguities and contradictions in participants’ talk were not the focus of our analysis. However, we could not and should not ignore the ways that participants constructed meaning in “real time” in interaction with the interviewer.

Taken together, these findings could be interpreted either from the perspective of discursive psychology, with its focus on self-presentational concerns and identity construction, or from the perspective of media studies that ‘media violence’ is an arbitrary and meaningless category (Barker & Petley, 2002). It may be a difficult task, but in future, researchers may attempt to tease apart these two alternative explanations of participants’ talk about their motives to engage with violent fictional entertainment.

It is easier for people to discuss what they are familiar with than what they are unfamiliar with (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). When talking about escapist motives for watching violent content,

participants hesitated less and were better able to articulate their responses, referring often to escapism directly as their motivation to watch. On this topic, participants engaged in less self-censoring, despite the fact that some aspects of escapism involved uncomfortable topics, such as role-playing as a villain or indulging a dark side. Escapism is language that is easily accessible to laypersons familiar with the idea of escaping reality by pretending to be something one is not (Hagstrom & Kaldo, 2014). The availability of this commonplace explanation may have made it seem more socially acceptable to the interviewee (i.e. everybody knows this; it's normative), easier for participants to articulate their motive, and so offer it to the interviewer as an explanation for their viewing behaviour.

Immersion is the act of becoming absorbed or involved in something to the point of losing focus on reality (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004). Although participants distinguished between violence in the 'real' world and violence in entertainment, they still claimed that fictional violence offered valid insight into criminal minds and effective preparation for dealing with difficulty or violence in real life.

According to cultural transportation theory, fictional mediums transport individuals out of reality and into a story world, but in some cases, the immersion is so great that the lines between fiction and reality become blurred (Green, et al., 2004). This is exemplified by what is known as the 'CSI effect', where jurors are reluctant to convict those on trial without strong forensic evidence because they expect such evidence from their viewing of fictional mediums (Schweitzer & Saks, 2007). Similarly, the more psychological crime programs such as *Criminal*

Minds and *Lie to me* have caused people to think they can predict or understand behaviour on the basis of a few visual cues (Levine et al., 2010).

Limitations

Some aspects of this study limit the kinds of conclusions we may offer. The first is sample homogeneity. We interviewed white, European adults who were willing to talk about their engagement with violent entertainment within a research setting. Individuals who watch violent fiction but do not want to talk about it with researchers may have qualitatively different subjective experiences of the motives that compel them to watch, or simply be more sensitive to negative judgments of individuals with strong proclivities for fictionalized violence. People from other age groups or other social categories with very different relationships to violence, crime, and the social justice system may be motivated to watch violent television to satisfy a very different set of needs. For example, incarcerated individuals with first-hand experiences of the justice system might offer us a very different interpretation of the justice motive. Further, as Hill's (2002) research showed, an examination of gendered perspectives on types of violence (e.g., general versus sexual) in film and television might also further illuminate the motives that underpin engagement with fictionalized violence. Future research with samples from different populations will add to our understanding of the motives that underpin individuals' engagement with violent fictional content.

Second, in designing our study, we asked participants about their subjective understanding of their motives to engage with passive forms of fictional entertainment that are pervasive in our society: film, television, and graphic novels. Although we believe that the

experience of these forms of entertainment are highly similar, because the individual is a passive recipient of a story that they cannot manipulate (unlike active engagement with video games, for example), it could be that, were we to tease apart the different motivations for still images and print are qualitatively different from the motivations to engage with sound and moving images. Future research is needed to determine whether or not this is the case. Nevertheless, we believe we did glean important information from this study by asking our participants to talk about their motives to engage with any or all of these forms of fictionalized entertainment and letting participants lead the conversation by choosing which one to talk about.

Third, it should be noted that we directed our analysis toward identification of motivations for and experiences of engagement with violent fictional content. In doing so, we chose to accept participants' descriptions of their motivations as relatively accurate representations of their subjective, internal psychological experiences. Alternative approaches, such as discourse analysis, may have yielded a different analysis, such as how participants strategically employed talk about engagement with violent fiction in ways that manage or enhance personal and social identities.

Conclusions

Our findings illustrate some of the multiple motives people have to watch fictional content and raise further questions that could be explored in future research. For example, does the justice motive increase tolerance, support for, or acceptance of retributive violence such as vigilante justice and capital punishment in the real world? Are some motives for watching violent fiction moderators of the relationship between watching violent content and aggressive

behaviour? Do law enforcement officials or forensic psychologists, who regularly encounter violent individuals, feel differently about the use of violent entertainment to understand deviant behaviour?

Our findings highlight patterns of motivation involved in individuals' choices regarding violent fiction, something that previous research has only touched upon. Our findings offer a greater understanding of why people engage with graphic entertainment. Most importantly, this research highlights a troubling link between violent fiction and individuals' perceptions of the real world.

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